

Bangladeshi Politicians, the People, and Whataboutism

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Abstract

Whataboutism is a logical fallacy used to discredit an opponent's claim by deflecting it to something else. In the present world the practice of whataboutism, an old phenomenon, spreads like a disease and it is the disease that is contagious. In the present world, whataboutism sees its distinct manifestation in the speech of Donald Trump, the present American president, and many others. To cut the ground from under the feet of their opponents, some Bangladeshi politicians, like Trump, use this whataboutism without paying proper attention to the effects of it in the long course of the country which is still fighting its way to an emerging social democratic state with a steady economy. This practice in Bangladesh, like many other countries, lets the politicians go loose on many happenings which they are accused of. Consequently, the condition of good governance in Bangladesh becomes vulnerable. Bangladesh, the country which already embarked on the highway of middle-earning economy in the world, has already been decelerated for such a political standpoint. These politicians always look to blame their opponents to convince the people that whatever they have done is of almost no harm in comparison with what somebody else has done. In this article, I intend to analyze, through a case study and analytical induction, the relationship between the Bangladeshi people and politicians who deflect real facts, and the impacts of whataboutism which results in impediments in the progress towards the social democracy envisioned before and during the inception of the Liberation War of 1971.

Keywords: whataboutism, Donald Trump, Bangladesh, politics, social democracy

What is Whataboutism?

Whataboutism is a rhetoric device used to divert the charge of the misdeed one has committed. Whataboutism also encompasses political propaganda, hypocrisy, national ideology, etc. Although its uses vary and at times, according to perspective, it can be perceived as something good, mostly the term is negative and the people associated with whataboutism can be labeled as decadent. The comparison between two things which are used in whataboutism does not always have to be relevant or of a similar type. Whataboutism is a “cheap rhetorical tactic that relies on drawing false or sketchy comparisons between two things which may not actually be all that comparable” (Bump).

Politicians blame opponents for their actions mostly on similar issues to show people that their action is less harmful in degree. They are driven by some degree of madness essential for keeping their political shows on. Knowing for sure that their actions are wrong, politicians, once challenged, through comparison of others' actions, try to prove how less harmful their actions are and tend to prove that their seemingly erroneous actions will have a good impact in the long run. It is as if they, as leaders of their people, are walking on a rope with all their people and they do not believe in the power of the rope. Whataboutism does not only “help to deflect your original argument but it also throws you off balance,” says Independent Russian journalist Alexey Kovalev (Zak). He also says, “You are playing chess and your opponent – while making a lousy move – he just punches you on the nose” (Zak).



Whataboutism is an ornamental persuasive speech device “that was particularly popular during the Soviet era, when officials would dodge difficult questions by throwing mud at the United States – at one point so common that it became the punch-line of a Russian joke” (Beckwith). Obviously, the clownish standpoint of those politicians, who frequently amuse themselves in thinking about their smart trick, was downplayed. It is important to register that people in the present world, because of the continuous flow of analytical news, editorials, writings, have already become good judges. The continuous flow of news and information has become the people’s strength in the face of whataboutism.

The Source of Whataboutism

Our subconscious defense is a great source of whataboutism. Whataboutism is a hypocritical move and it works as a defense for the ones who use it to hide the guilt in them. In our subconscious state we do not want to recognize something that may frustrate our comfort zone. We remain alert that anything may come out and cause trouble to our regular rhythmic life. On the other hand it is language that is another great source of whataboutism. We experience ourselves and the world around us by means of language and “all language is an unstable, ambiguous force-field of competing ideologies (Tyson 257). Consequently, “we are, ourselves, unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies” (Tyson 257). And thus the user of whataboutism senses the justification of deflecting facts.

In the present world it is Donald Trump who has become one of the most famous politicians for raising whataboutism to a cult status. Whenever Trump is asked or challenged by critics, politicians, and journalists about his wrongdoings, he immediately, in many cases, blames others who have made similar mistakes or gives an irrelevant answer. For him there is always an “other” to be blamed. Following the North Korea summit in Singapore on June 12, 2018, Trump was asked by Bret Baier of Fox News about his calling Kim a killer. In his usual Trump manner he dogged the question.

Baier: You were asked in the press conference a number of different times, different ways, about human rights and that you called this relationship really good and that [Kim] was a very talented person. You know, you call sometimes killers. He is a killer. He’s clearly executing people.

Trump: He’s a tough guy. Hey, when you take over a country, tough country, with tough people, and you take it over from your father, I don’t care who you are, what you are, how much of an advantage you have. If you can do that at 27 years old, that’s one-in-10,000 that could do that. So he’s a very smart guy. He’s a great negotiator, but I think we understand each other.

Trump turns this whataboutism into a dangerous device. In his desperate moments he thinks the only thing that may save his neck, even for the time being, is this device. To him this world has liars, frauds, deceivers and thus it cannot be stated that he is guilty for having one or all of those vices. For Trump, nobody is perfect, “[a]nd since nobody is perfect, all criticism is hypocritical and everyone should do whatever they want ...” (Watch).

The most famous recent example was Trump’s reaction to the alt-right rally in Charlottesville. When a neo-Nazi intentionally drove a car into a mass of people and killed protestor Heather Heyer, Trump responded by looking for equal fault on the other side:

When Trump is asked about a neo-Nazi who intentionally drove a car into the alt-right rally in Charlottesville and killed protester Heather Heyer, he instead of answering straight the question said, “A defense attorney could not stand up in court and say ‘maybe my client did murder those people, but what about Jeffrey Dahmer? What about Al Capone? What about the guy from Silence of the Lambs? I rest my case.’” (Watch)

Whataboutism in Bangladesh

Before the Liberation War in 1971, Bangladeshi politicians, better known to the rest of the world as East Pakistanis, had been striving for political and economic emancipation. Their actions and speeches were direct. In that dire situation, the whole nation had only one agenda – freedom. And the political leaders had no other choice but to fight for the nation’s sovereignty. But after a few years of the nation’s independence, the political leaders became divided in the name of ideological differences. After the killing of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, many opportunists appeared on the political scene of Bangladesh. In the competition of being country’s political leaders, some of them started transmuting facts and at the same time highlighting other political leaders’ wrongdoings.

The practice of whataboutism aims to deprive the people’s right to know about the actions of their elected politicians. In Bangladesh the same practice under the guise of euphemism and metaphor finds its way expanding. In both Awami League and BNP regimes, during the country-wide hartals, people got killed, shot, burnt, and the nation saw deceleration in its economic growth, social stability, and governance. While justifying their actions, the parties accused each other. During early 2015, the BNP was hurling petrol bombs in streets, buses, public gatherings. On February 1, 2015, BNP leader Salauddin from a hideout said, “Government agents are killing people by hurling petrol bombs but the government is putting the blame on the BNP-led 20-party alliance to stigmatise the people’s logical ongoing movement” (BNP: Hartal). At the same time, in 2013, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told the House about BNP’s country-wide violence: “The violent activities would not be able to stop the ongoing war-crimes trial, although the BNP chief has allegedly been fuelling violence against the state. She [Khaleda] must take the responsibility for taking so many lives” (Ruling). Both the AL and BNP leaders in their times of danger blamed each other, and whenever they are reminded about the heinous effects of their actions, they pointed to the opposition party’s actions of the same manner.

Why Does Whataboutism Function in Bangladesh

After the coup in 1975 which killed Bangladeshi President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the political scenario of Bangladesh drastically changed and the subsequent politicians till date have continually been using whataboutism. In 1972, Bangladeshi politicians under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman started their journey with a new vision. They started towards a liberal democratic state which was grounded on four basic principles – nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism. But within a very short time, they made the system “highly personalized, centralized, and increasingly repressive” (Kochanek 52). After Mujibur Rahman two generals, under the guise of democracy, ruled the country till 1990. Within that time many opportunists entered into the politics of Bangladesh and they found whataboutism a feasible device to deflect the criticism directed at them. This trend is still in use. For example, to manipulate history for their political benefit, in 2014 BNP leader Tarique Rahman, the senior vice chairman, in a desperate move, labeled Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, under whose auspicious leadership the country gained independence, as a collaborator

of West Pakistan. He said,

Awami League claims that they are the pro-Liberation War party. And what did Sheikh Mujib do to this party – banned it. You (Sheikh Mujib) are the greatest Razakar of the world [...] You have banned the pro-Liberation War party, and it was the worst act against the Liberation War. Who can take such action against the Liberation War? Only a Razakar would do that. Then what should Sheikh Mujib be called? (Tarique).

The Impacts of Whataboutism

The techniques, John Oliver says, are “depressively effective” (Watch) and its impacts upon the lives of the people concerned is effectively destructive. In Bangladesh, the negative impact of whataboutism is way too extended and it tends to complicate the whole course of the nation. Being in the process of acquiring freedom and sovereignty from the long oppressive ruling of the colonizers, the country as West Pakistan got partial freedom in 1947. Then again the country achieved its freedom in 1971 by driving the West Pakistanis away. The perplexed sense of nationalism that helped the whole country drive the English and Pakistani people away in 1947 and 1971 respectively, again got entangled within the claws of autocratic ruling from the politicians within.

Whataboutism takes its toll mostly on the working class, the most vital strength of the state, on whose labor the country stands. It is mostly they who run the wheels of the state. They are not there to be cheated by the politicians who justify the cheating with their fabricated speech. It is the politicians who have greater responsibility to make people believe that they belong to the country as citizens, irrespective of their race, color, and religion. The country runs better as a whole. When politicians lie, cheat, make lame excuses, and indicate others’ transgressions to cover their wrongdoings, then for a country like Bangladesh not only the existing problems continue but the possibilities for future crimes gets extended. The two major parties – Awami League and BNP – in most cases, stand against each other, no matter what the issues are. It has become a political stance in Bangladesh. In 2011, Sheikh Hasina was asked by Anup Kaphle from *The Washington Post* about the Rapid Action Battalion’s actions and how they play their role of judge, jury, and executioner, and operate with impunity, she immediately blamed the former government, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), saying, “Actually in 2004 this force was established, but it is true that at that time the former government used this force politically and they were allowed to kill many people and this and that” (Whataboutism: The Cold War Tactic). So, the hint is, if there is mismanagement in RAB, BNP is there to be accused because it is during the reign of BNP that the Rapid Action Battalion was founded. On the other hand, regarding the abolition of RAB, former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia said, “This force is working against the people and is not needed anymore” (Islam). She said it when she found the RAB’s actions went against her party interests. On the other hand, Sheikh Hasina will not abolish the RAB now and if there is anything deplorable in them, it is BNP who will be held responsible since they established the RAB.

Former dictator Hussain Mohammed Ershad, accused of triggering communalism in Bangladesh for the sake of his political benefits, is one of the great practitioners of whataboutism. After the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman in 1981, General Ershad came to power by overthrowing the elected president Abdus Sattar on March 24, 1982. Ershad knew that his acceptability among the people was little and questionable. There was no fair chance for him to be the elected leader of the country. So, he had to frame something false at times and repeatedly deflect or lie to make the lies seem true to the people or divert the people to another issue. He wanted to rule the country

without making politics open to other candidates. When asked, in 1984, by Mary Anne Weaver, whether he was willing to “open politics” before the election, Ershad, instead of answering the question straight, said that he decreed martial law because the country “was going to the dogs.” Ershad added, “If there was no martial law, who would run the country between now and the elections? Who would hold the elections?” (Weaver). Ershad dodged the question to justify his being in power. But what happened to him in the end was disastrous both for him and the country. He was ousted in 1990 and now his name is synonymous with bad politics.

In 2017 and 2018, many women were sent to Saudi Arabia as domestic workers. After a few months, their condition was reported as terrible. Many of them were abused, beaten, sexually harassed, and paid no salary. In desperation, some of them fled: “Naseeba is one of hundreds of Bangladeshi women that have fled their Saudi employers. The Bangladeshi embassy in Riyadh estimates that there are currently around 329 women seeking refuge inside the embassy awaiting to return. More than 500 were returned to Bangladesh at the end of last month” (*Daily Sun*). But the Bangladesh government rejects such reports of the repatriated women workers from Saudi Arabia: “Followed by a visit to Saudi Arabia, members of a parliamentary committee said lack of knowledge in local language, dislike for Saudi food and homesickness cause the women to return home” (“Bangladesh’s Female Domestic Workers”).

Conclusion

We are what we say, what we do. Our saying is language; our actions get subsequently transcribed into language. So politicians’ words and actions are the languages exposed to the judgment of the people who voted for them: “Indeed, to understand the full implications of the idea of a ‘constitutive human process’ it is to changing concepts of language that we must turn” (Williams 20). Turning to the language of our politicians what we see is a blame-game that signifies the actions of the politicians who lead countries by which this world is made. Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia, Narendra Modi – all of them at times use this blame-game instead of constructive answers when they are challenged.

Language itself is faulty once they are received by us. The way words produce their meaning in us indicates the irrevocable gap between the intended and the received meaning. Homi K. Bhabha observes, “Communication is a process that is never perfectly achieved and that there is always a slippage, a gap, between what is said and what is heard” (qtd. in Loomba, 89). And there are opportunistic politicians who try their best to use that gap of language for their own selfish needs. Since the development of Bangladesh depends greatly on the decisions of the politicians, the practice of whataboutism increases the political complexities which have already been proved as impediments in the ongoing progress of Bangladesh.

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